

Could people reasonably 'agree to disagree' over religious claims?

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Research Essay

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Disagreement, particularly over religious claims, is a common feature of one’s experience of the world. It is often founded on miscommunication and a difference in knowledge or reasoning ability. However, disagreement can sometimes occur between likeminded individuals with similar evidence. Epistemologists have debated whether different sorts of religious disagreements are reasonable, and whether the rational response to disagreement should change as people become more epistemically equal. The purpose of this essay is to show that peers can reasonably agree to disagree over religious claims. Using Wald’s (2010) distinction between close and remote epistemic peers, I will argue that remote peers can reasonably use different epistemic standards to arrive at opposing conclusions. Moreover, I will show that private evidence undermines the conditions for close peers and allows for reasonable disagreement. Firstly, I will define an epistemic peer using Kelly’s (2005) conditions and distinguish between close and remote peers in relation to these conditions. Secondly, I will contrast Feldman’s (2007) claims against reasonable disagreement between remote peers and show that people can reasonably use different epistemic standards to evaluate a body of evidence. Specifically, I will show that the epistemic debate between the reliability and significance of different types of evidence has not been terminated, allowing peers to justly hold different epistemic standards. Subsequently, this will demonstrate that different epistemic standards permit opposing steadfast conclusions from the same body of evidence. Finally, I will explicate Wald (2010), Feldman (2007), and Elga’s (2007) equal-weight position against reasonable disagreement between close peers. I conclude by showing that these positions rely upon the uniqueness principle, which only applies to close peers under Kelly’s (2005) conditions. I argue that an appeal to private evidence, in relation to religious experiences, undermines the second condition for close peers. Accordingly, the uniqueness principle does not apply in contexts which involve private evidence, and people can reasonably agree to disagree, due to each peer’s subjective totality of evidence.

1. Epistemic Peers

It is understandable when individuals with different intelligence, background knowledge, and worldviews disagree. Disagreement is somewhat expected when peers are epistemically remote. For example, a westernised clinical psychologist and a yogi from Kashmir may likely disagree about the primary causes of depression. Conversely, disagreement can be surprising when peers share a foundation of evidence and are practically equal with respect to intellectual quality and background. Such individuals with likeminded epistemic values, and a shared awareness of evidence for a claim, are considered *epistemic peers* (Feldman, 2007). There are more strictly defined notions of epistemic peers within the literature that require an equal familiarity with all the evidence for a claim, and equal epistemic standards such as intelligence, thoughtfulness, methods of evaluation of evidence and its significance, and freedom from bias. Kelly (2005) defines the following two necessary conditions for this notion of an epistemic peer:

- I. An individual who shares one’s own deepest epistemic standards.
- II. An individual who has an equal awareness of the body of evidence for a claim.

It is debated within the literature whether one can reasonably disagree with an epistemic peer or must suspend judgement. Wald (2010) distinguishes between two types of epistemic peers, namely close, and remote peers, to more precisely define when it may be appropriate to suspend judgement. Close peers reason and evaluate the significance of evidence similarly and must meet both of Kelly’s (2005) conditions. For example, when asked about the River Torrens, two Adelaide University graduate water researchers in the same lab, experiencing the same training and supervision throughout their education, may be considered close peers. They think similarly and have access to the same body of evidence. Conversely, remote peers reason differently, but remain equally intelligent and informed of the evidence. Remote peers satisfy Kelly’s (2005) second condition, however, fail to adequately satisfy the first. For example, a utilitarian and a Kantian moral philosopher may both be equally intelligent and informed of the relevant literature, though they will likely disagree about the correct conclusion to an ethical dilemma.

Wald (2010) claims that remote peers are rationally justified to hold opposing steadfast views. The difference in epistemic standards allows individuals to justifiably arrive at different conclusions. This assertion assumes that both epistemic standards for evaluating the evidence are reasonable.¹ Feldman (2007) disagrees with this claim, arguing that only one epistemic standard is most reasonable in each disagreement. Conversely to Wald (2010), Feldman (2007) implies that disagreement between remote peers is not reasonable. The difference in epistemic standards between remote peers will be investigated in section 2.1. Furthermore, in the case of disagreement between close peers, Wald (2010), Feldman (2007), and Elga (2007) argue that people should reasonably suspend judgement, not agree to disagree. These arguments will be investigated further in section 2.2.

2. Reasonable Disagreement between Steadfast Views

Below, I will contend that both remote and close epistemic peers can reasonably agree to disagree. Differences in epistemic standards and private evidence are two important points that rest at the core of religious disagreement between peers. Contrasting these points with the notion of epistemic peers will indicate why reasonable disagreement over religious claims is justified.

2.1 Remote Peers: Epistemic Standards and Starting Points

Disagreement over religious claims is evident between remote peers. In a religious context, people of different faiths, belief systems, and denominations, can be considered remote peers, as they hold different epistemic standards. Differences in epistemic standards are mediated by an individual's starting point and warrant disagreement (Kelly, 2005). This is because peers from different starting points evaluate the significance of evidence differently.² One's worldview, namely their starting point, is based on a preconceived conception of the significance of certain factors, and the way in which these factors should be evaluated. Specifically, I am referring to the significance assigned to different *types* of evidence. For instance, an individual with a predominately scientific worldview may value empirical evidence more than a theistic worldview values personal evidence. Likewise, a rationalist position may value evidence from logical truth rather than empirical or personal evidence.³ Types of evidence are valued differently, allowing peers to disagree on the correct doxastic attitude towards a claim. Explicitly, a body of evidence, E, may comprise of evidence for, E+, and evidence against, E-, a belief, X. Let E+ be predominately comprised of logical evidence, and E- be predominantly comprised of empirical evidence. A starting point that greatly values logical evidence will assign more significance to E+, and likely come to believe X. Conversely, a starting point that more greatly values empirical evidence will assign more significance to E-, and likely come to disbelieve X. Therefore, if remote peers hold different epistemic standards for evaluating the significance of personal, empirical, and logical evidence, disagreement can be expected.

Feldman (2007) argues that different starting points do not allow individuals to reasonably arrive at the same conclusions from different evidence. He implies that, although individuals hold different epistemic standards regarding empirical, logical, and private evidence, these standards will dissipate after exhaustive discussion. Once the starting points are evaluated, Feldman (2007) believes that there will be one position that is deemed less reasonable. The reliability of evidence and starting point may be disputed in discussion. However, there is no objective standard of reliability to which we can hold these types of evidence. In other words, Feldman (2007) does not offer a solution as to how

¹ Notably, the essay question is subject to ambiguity concerning 'reasonably'. The literature tends to make a nuanced distinction between reasonable and rational (Alston, 1991; Elga, 2007; Feldman, 2007; Kelly, 2013; Wald, 2010), and this essay will only be concerned with the strict notions of both. Namely, a belief may be reasonable if it has adequate evidence for justification, and rational if it accords with an individual's epistemic standards and totality of available evidence. These definitions accord with epistemic rationality (Foley, 1987), and the stricter notion of reasonability (Benton, 2021; Feldman, 2007).

² Expressly, people do not weigh evidential factors equally when evaluating a proposition, which can cause a disagreement based on the same body of evidence. The difference in evaluation arises because people have different fundamental principles and worldviews which they use to evaluate evidence.

³ A rationalist position refers to worldviews which share a similar epistemic attitude as Descartes and Spinoza (Russell, 1967). These views regard *reason* as the most significant source and test of knowledge.

peers should judge which starting point is most reasonable. He indefensibly claims that there is a correct starting point which peers will discover through discussion and evaluation.

Disagreement with a remote peer from a different starting point provides an opportunity to investigate one's epistemic standards and the reasons for why they are preferred. Fundamentally, individual epistemic standards are shaped by cultural/environmental epistemic standards, which are subsequently stored in complex belief structures. Arguably, even after exhaustive investigation into the founding belief structure of one's epistemic standards, there will be no objective standard on which to judge the reasonableness of other starting points and their preference towards certain types of evidence. The different significance of logical, empirical, and personal evidence is not objectively defined. The reliability of the specific evidence may be disputed, but the underlying preference towards a particular type of evidence is relative. Disputes between empirical and rational epistemic standards have independent justifications, and peers may not reach a reasonable termination of the correct doxastic attitude. The interminability of peer dispute is exemplified by the ongoing debate between rationalism and empiricism (Murphy, 2010).⁴ The epistemic debate between the reliability and significance of these different types of evidence has not been terminated. Therefore, multiple epistemic standards may be valid, and individuals can reasonably evaluate evidence from their justified starting points.

Unfortunately for Feldman (2007), there is no framework on which to judge the most reasonable starting point. Foley (1987) establishes that a belief is rational for a peer if it corresponds with their epistemic standards. This conception of rationality is relativistic, as it does not suggest a correct, objective epistemic standard. If there is no correct epistemic standard, a belief is only required to correspond with one's justified epistemic standard to be rational. Foley (1987) indicates that epistemic standards are successively defined and justified by what the individual would believe if they were sufficiently reflective.⁵ Therefore, after reflection, because both empirical and rationalist perspectives are reasonable, both peers can reasonably arrive at different epistemic standards. If both sides hold opposing beliefs that corresponds with their relative epistemic standard, the peers can reasonably agree to disagree.⁶

2.2 Close Peers: Equal-Weight and the Uniqueness Principle

Wald (2010), Feldman (2007), and Elga (2007) argue that close peers, who conform to conditions I. and II. (Kelly, 2005), cannot reasonably disagree. They assert that close peers who disagree must reasonably suspend judgement after exhaustive discussion of evidence and epistemic standards of evaluation. Their arguments commonly appeal to the equal-weight position to justify why one should reasonably suspend judgement when disagreeing with a close peer. The equal-weight position states that, if each epistemic peer is equally likely to have made an error, the parties should suspend judgement by applying an equal credence to the likelihoods of the competing propositions (Elga, 2007). For example, suppose two close peers, who have the same quality of vision, are at the top of the Napier building. One peer seems to have spotted Jon Opie on North Terrace, and the other seems to spot nobody on North Terrace. Prior to announcing their experiences, each peer is reasonable in their belief. Feldman (2007) believes that once the peers announce their beliefs, the beliefs become unreasonable, and the peers must suspend judgement. His conclusion assumes that both peers share the same body of evidence

⁴ Rationalists believe that the most reliable source of evidence comes from logic/reason and tend to justify their framework by appealing to the certainty of logical truths. Conversely, empiricists believe that the most significant source of evidence is from sense experience and tend to justify their framework by showing that reason alone does not provide any evidence (Zimmerman, 2008).

⁵ Importantly, there is still fundamental disagreement about this characterisation of rationality (Eder, 2021). However, this formulation of epistemic rationality expressed by Foley (1987), is well supported in the literature as a valid method for establishing rationality (Harman, 1999; Kelly, 2003; Plantinga, 1993).

⁶ For analogy, imagine driving with a remote peer through unknown bushland to arrive at a marked destination. The road suddenly forks into a left and right path, and the map offers no indication of the most reasonable path. The paths represent different epistemic standards and you both have access to the same evidence on which path may be correct. However, the evidence for which path is correct happens to be inconclusive. Therefore, you happen to come to different conclusions on which path to take. One peer can reasonably choose the left and vice versa. Therefore, both parties can reasonably use different epistemic standards. Consequently, if a remote peer's belief corresponds to their relative epistemic standard, they can reasonably agree to disagree.

and epistemic standards. The conclusion is rational because there is an equal-weight that both peers have made a mistake.

This equal-weight position relies upon the *uniqueness principle*, which asserts that any given body of evidence, E, can only justify one competing doxastic attitude towards a proposition (Feldman, 2007). If the principle is true, because close epistemic peers share E, they cannot reasonably agree to disagree because one of them must be mistaken. Therefore, as Wald (2010) concludes, the only reasonable position when faced with disagreement amongst close peers is to suspend judgement until discussion offers a resolution. Elga (2007) and Feldman (2007) similarly maintain that steadfast disagreement among close peers is unreasonable for this reason.

If we take the uniqueness principle to be true, close peers who share epistemic standards, and the same body of evidence, could not rationally agree to disagree over religious claims. Notably, if close peers share epistemic standards (i.e., there is no difference in starting points), the response for explicated in section 3.1 for reasonable disagreement does not hold. To justify a case for reasonable disagreement regarding the equal-weight position maintained by Elga (2007), Feldman (2007), and Wald (2010), many theorists have opted for a critique and rejection of the uniqueness thesis (Ballantyne & Coffman, 2011; Conee, 2009; Goldman, 2010; Kopec, 2015; Rosa, 2012). Below, I argue that a rejection of the second condition (II.) for close peers may also justify a case for reasonable disagreement.

2.3 Private Evidence

Due to private evidence, Kelly's (2005) second condition (II.) is unachievable. Therefore, people cannot be close peers, and subsequently do not need to satisfy the uniqueness thesis. This allows people to reasonably agree to disagree. Positions which support uniqueness to assert that disagreement is unreasonable falsely assume that close peers hold the same body of evidence. Evidently, people are not close peers, as they cannot adequately share their totality of evidence. People foster complex belief structures, unconscious psychological dispositions, and private experience. This private evidence is inexplicable to others, and subsequently remains unshared. An appeal to subjective experience is frequently used to back up religious claims (Alston, 1991). For instance, experiences with a divine presence, often shared by expressing that someone has 'seen', 'connected', or 'experienced' God, is an appeal to private evidence. Private evidence is subjective, and these experiences can justify our beliefs of the external world. Moreover, one cannot experience other people's personal encounters with God. Therefore, the totality of evidence used for an individual's evaluation of religious claims cannot be shared. Consequently, Kelly's (2005) second condition (II.), is undermined if at least one peer is using private evidence to evaluate a religious claim.

After the objective evidence has been exhausted between conflicting parties, an epistemic dead end is reached. However, close peers are still not epistemically equal if one of them possesses private evidence. Anybody can reasonably hold and use private evidence to justify their beliefs of the external world (Alston, 1991). Presumably, this is rational if one can reasonably trust their senses. The close peers at the top of the Napier building can reasonably trust their senses, and their experiences should be used as evidence in justifying their belief. They should not dismiss their private evidence after learning of the other peer's contradictory experience. If an individual has exclusive access to private evidence, disagreement with a peer that lacks this evidence does not motivate a change in belief; It motivates further investigation into the reliability of the experience. Without having a sufficient reason to doubt one's senses (e.g., being in a hallucinatory state), the evidence should not be entirely dismissed, or judgement suspended. Importantly, one's private evidence is more significant than another's private counter evidence because its access is exclusive to the beholder. One can be *more* certain of their own private experience, compared to another's private experience.⁷ Expressly, I can be very confident that I saw Jon because I experienced it. I cannot be as confident that you did not see Jon, because I am not

⁷ Higher trust in one's own experience compared to other's experiences is best understood in the context of discussions that concern 'The Problem of Other Minds' (Overgaard, 2006; Waldow, 2009). One can only observe the behaviour of others and then *infer* that they have a subjective experience. One cannot know whether others have minds, as the nature of subjectivity does not allow objective access to private information. Therefore, one should always assign a higher reliability to their own experience, compared to that of others.

privity to your experience. Because private evidence is exclusive to the beholder, one's own private evidence should be considered more significant than the expression of a peer's experience.

However, Feldman (2007) claims that it is unreasonable to assert that one's experience is more significant than someone else's. He emphasises that another individual's contradictory private evidence is evidence against one's own private evidence. Therefore, the equal-weight position applies, as the private evidence is effectively cancelled out, and the correct doxastic attitude is to suspend judgement. This implies that another individual's private experience is equal to one's own. Arguably, the defence fails to show that another's contradictory private evidence is enough to warrant an equal-weight position.⁸ Kelly (2013) responds to this claim by distinguishing between first-order and higher-order private evidence. First-order evidence is the private evidence on which one initially arrives at their conclusions. For example, the personal experience of seeing Jon on North Terrace. Higher-order evidence is the evidence gained from learning about the disagreement between private experiences. For example, learning that your peer did not see Jon. Kelly (2013) agrees with Feldman (2007) that parties must consider both forms of evidence, but asserts that, in some cases, the first-order evidence is strong enough to maintain a steadfast position. The peer may lose some confidence in their belief after discovering the higher-order evidence. However, this new higher-order evidence may not be compelling enough to cancel out the significance of the first-order evidence and justify an equal-weight position (Kelly, 2013). A religious experience may be uncommunicable and convincing beyond another peer's evidence or explanation. If private evidence is convincing after exhaustive reflection and scrutiny, it may reasonably justify a steadfast view.

Consequently, people reasonably hold opposing steadfast religious views, as private evidence, such as divine experience, justifies their position more strongly than higher-order evidence. If the sum of objective and private evidence supports a proposition, it would be unreasonable to suspend judgement in consideration of the total evidence.⁹ If this is the case, people can agree to disagree, if their private evidence is adequate and points to an opposing conclusion.

In conclusion, arguments against reasonable disagreement that deliberate the notion of epistemic peers must account for how people should judge which starting point is most reasonable. Evidently, the disagreement is only unreasonable if there is a correct starting point which peers will discover through discussion and evaluation. I have argued that people can prefer different types of evidence, and their chosen preference does not have an objective epistemic standard over which the reliability and significance of evidence should be evaluated. People can reasonably evaluate the significance of different types of evidence, namely empirical, logical, and private evidence, in accordance with their fundamental epistemic principles. According to Foley's (1987) notion of epistemic rationality, this allows people to hold opposing steadfast views that are justified by their relative epistemic standards. Both positions are reasonable, consequently, remote peers can reasonably agree to disagree. Furthermore, the arguments against reasonable disagreement between close peers' appeal to the equal-weight view, which relies upon the uniqueness principle. The existence of private evidence undermines Kelly's (2003) second condition for close epistemic peers. Therefore, people who reasonably use private evidence in evaluation of a belief do not hold the same body of evidence as their peer, and the uniqueness principle does not hold. Additionally, first-order evidence can be more significant than higher-order evidence, as an individual has exclusive access, higher confidence, and more significance regarding the former. After exhaustive reflection and scrutiny of private evidence, it may provide adequate evidential support for one doxastic attitude, over another. In a religious context, people can hold private evidence in the form of a divine experience. If this first-order evidence endures deep reflection and scrutiny, it may justify an opposing steadfast position. In this case, the opposing peer does not have access to the first-order evidence. Consequently, they must reasonably agree to disagree.

⁸ Additionally, Feldman's (2007) response implies that a personal divine experience should be considered equally significant to a different peer's experience. Explicitly, this response suggests that any mystical experience that another peer has, should be considered as equally significant as one's own private experiences.

⁹ If the totality of evidence justly supports one of the competing propositions, suspension of judgement is unreasonable. Presumably, there is a threshold of support required for a position to be justified, and if the evidence surpasses this threshold, the individual should reasonably conform their belief.

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